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WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

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WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE

by
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Washington 25, D. C.

1. The position of women in a society has long been considered an index to its degree of civilization. For the most part this concept relates to the legal and social status of women and their acceptance by men as partners in life rather than merely as chattels, servants or bearers of children. Historically, the ancient civilizations where women were held in esteem as persons were usually the societies which contributed greatly to advances in knowledge, the arts and social and political organization. In Babylon under Hammurabi, in Egypt under the Pharaohs, in Rome during the height of the Empire, women enjoyed extensive property rights, personal freedom and education, rights which were generally lost to them during the Middle Ages. Many of these rights were re-won in modern times only with the emergence of industrialized societies.

2. It is a matter of pride to Americans that the new spirit of freedom and independence generated by the settlement of North America also stimulated those movements in the 19th Century which have produced so many personal, political and economic gains for women in the United States. If one can apply the term "export" to intangibles, it is certainly clear that these ideas of woman's rightful place in modern society have constituted an important part of our foreign trade to many parts of the world. Today the women of the Far East and of Africa are throwing their intelligence and energies into the improvement of women's position and thereby the well-being of all in their own newly developing countries.

3. It would be a difficult matter to prove that industrialization per se has "caused" the change in women's status in the world. Nevertheless it is clear that her political rights, her social status and her freedom to conduct herself as an independent and responsible person have developed since machines began in an important way to take the place of hands in the production of goods, and since agriculture fell heir to technology in the production of food. To these revolutionary developments in human living and economic enrichment women have made and are continuing to make great contributions. Indeed it would be hard to imagine how an industrial society, wherever located in the world, could function without the participation of women as employees. Their special aptitudes for certain kinds of work, the sheer need for their numbers, as well as other potent factors, make them indispensable in an expanding modern economy.

4. In a paper this brief, it would be impossible either to traverse the history of women's employment or to describe in detail the present participation of women in the labor force throughout the world. The particulars vary substantially. Even among the industrialized countries the proportions of women in paid

employment outside the home differ greatly. In the United States, for example, one-third of our labor force is women, in the USSR it is over half, whereas in the Netherlands it is only 15 percent. Occupational distributions also vary. Although, for example, women are about three-fourths of all teachers in elementary and secondary schools in both the United States and USSR, three-fourths of all Russian doctors are women, compared with 6 percent in the United States. On the other hand, women are close to three-fifths of all agricultural workers in Russia compared with only one-fifth in the United States. In many of the newly evolving countries, too, a substantial body of agricultural work continues to be done by women, as has been traditional throughout recorded history. Indeed, archeologists generally give credit to women for "civilizing" wild grains, thereby giving birth to domestic agriculture itself, and consequently to the establishment of settled communities. Development of human society has come a long way since then, but it is well to remember that it was the acuity of women and their labor in the fields that brought man his first bread.

5. The most useful perspective on the subject of women's work in the U. S. including its social and cultural as well as its economic implications, can be achieved by tracing the progress of women to their present strategic position in the country's labor force. Perhaps a not-too-well recognized fact in our national history is that, with the first settlements on the North American continent, women shouldered the burdens of conquering a wilderness equally with the men. There were no sources of supply for food or clothing or shelter, other than in the new land and in the hands and sinews of the settlers themselves. The shops and farms of Europe were 3,000 dangerous miles away, across a forbidding sea.

6. In order to eat, corn and grain had to be planted and harvested, wild meat and fish preserved against the winter; material for clothing had to be woven from flax and wool, and garments fashioned; children had to be raised and schooled. These tasks fell largely to the women while the men felled trees, built houses, hunted game, made the laws, and protected the meager settlements. Indeed, women often took up the rifle to strengthen the defense. There was insufficient time and insufficient labor to permit women to be kept out of the basic tasks of the endeavor to build a new nation. And out of this cooperative economic effort women developed a sense of their own value as workers and partners which helped them later to win recognition of their entitlement to equal status with men as individuals and citizens.

The World of Women's Work in the United States

7. As early as the 1830's the unusual quality of women in the United States was noted by that sensitive observer of social customs, the Frenchman Alexis de Toqueville. In his book Democracy in America he wrote, "I do not hesitate to avow that---I have nowhere seen women occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked---to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply--to the superiority of their women." By the time of de Toqueville's observation, the textile industry had been established for some years in New England and already was drawing upon the young women in the rural areas for its labor supply. The heart of the matter, and the opening door to a new world of opportunity for women, was the fact that male labor was in short supply. Vast untouched lands lay to the West; the men went out to them; New England's unattached daughters went into the mills at home. This illustrates how in our early history women responded to industry's need for workers. Industrial leaders of the time extolled the merits of female employment. To it they attributed an improvement in morals, a reduction in idleness and dependency, and greater financial security for women; in short, a good thing all around.

8. Later, when women demanded the right to vote, they were often branded, as irresponsible and immoral for this ambition, but the long record of their economic contribution to the country's development as paid workers was among the most effective arguments for their political enfranchisement.

9. Today there are 24 million women in the U. S. labor force, constituting one-third of the total, and 36 percent of all women of working age (14 years and over). The female work force is older than it used to be. Half of our working women are more than 40 years of age; almost two-fifths are 45 or older. Over half our women workers are married and living with their husbands; and of all married women in the population, one-third are working in paid employment. Of course, much higher proportions of single women work--over 75 percent.

10. Women are employed in every major occupational group and in almost every one of the hundreds of specific occupations in the economy. Indeed there are few jobs left that are exclusively "men's jobs." In some, of course, only a few women are to be found. These are the extremely heavy or hazardous ones--like stevedoring, or astronauting. Most women who work are employees, but several hundred thousand run businesses of their own. More and more are entering professional and technical employment, of which teaching and nursing claim the highest proportions, but even greater numbers earn their living as clerical and office workers, operatives in factories and as service workers outside of private households.

11. Since 1940, the proportion of women among all employed workers has increased from one-fourth to one-third. Present projections indicate that women will constitute almost half the net increase in the total United States labor force at the end of the present decade. Their current participation in various occupational groups varies, of course, but over the past twenty years they have gained a far greater share than men of the increased employment in all the fastest growing occupations except the professional group. Their place has risen from 11 to almost 15 percent of all managerial jobs; from 54 to 68 percent of all clerical; from 26 to 36 percent of all sales; and from 38 to 52 percent of all service jobs outside of private households. Only among professional workers and factory operatives have their proportions remained unchanged since 1940--around two-fifths of all professionals and one-fourth of the factory group.

12. Although women need to make much more progress in professional and technical work, the changes in their occupational attachments indicate that they are succeeding in moving out of the more menial and poorly paid work into occupations requiring more skill and education, and offering them more dignity. They are thus demonstrating their ability to advance with our times, wherein jobs requiring higher skills and more education are expanding faster than others.

Legislation Governing Women's Employment

13. The path to today's achievements by women in the working world in the U. S. has not been an easy one. It is no exaggeration to say that for many, many years their labor was exploited--their hours of work, in factories especially, were long and often extended far into the night; their pay was very low compared with that of men; there was little concern for their health or their safety in the work surroundings. The abuses of the unregulated industrial homework system, wherein whole families were employed, including women and young children, were so great as to constitute a disgrace to the Nation s rapidly expanding nondurable goods industries. Even in the one professional occupation in which women were more fully accepted, the teaching of young children, their personal lives were constantly subject to the scrutiny of local school boards.

14. Eventually, the Nation's social conscience responded to the challenge of

widespread substandard working conditions. Today, after a century of development, each of the 50 States, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have laws relating to the employment of women. In 1962 almost all of our States have established standards of maximum daily or weekly hours for women, and a number of them have laws establishing a day of rest, meal periods and regulation of nightwork. The exact provisions vary and indeed there is some disagreement as to whether some, particularly nightwork provisions, may not be too restrictive, possibly an anachronism in the modern world. But our population generally supports legislation on hours of work that will protect health, insure the opportunity to carry out family obligations, and provide sufficient leisure. Many of these standards are now being observed generally for all workers, irrespective of sex.

15. The second step forward came in the area of minimum wages. In the late 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th, wages paid to women were generally so pitifully low as to fail to provide them a living wage. Absence of wage payment laws often cheated workers, men as well as women, even of the pittance they had earned.

16. Arguments for a decent minimum wage for all workers fell on barren soil, but the arguments in behalf of a minimum wage for women, "to protect their health and morals" eventually won response. In 1912, the State of Massachusetts passed the first minimum wage law. In 1962, 35 jurisdictions provide for the establishment of minimum wages for women, covering a variety of occupations, and using various kinds of procedures. In some States men are covered as well. Of course, the national Fair Labor Standards Act applies equally to both sexes. Its passage, in 1938, reflected the yeoman service performed by State legislation in the prior 25 years in educating the public and employers to the value of a floor for wages below which no worker could be hired.

17. The great unfinished business of today's working women in the United States is to get overall legislation in the field of equal pay. True, 22 States do have such legislation, establishing the principle of payment of "rate for the job," irrespective of sex. World War II stimulated legislation of this kind because of the devoted work of women in our war production industries and in the myriad of services previously performed by men. In the autumn of 1962 national legislation providing for equitable wage treatment for women workers made more headway in the Congress than ever before. Meanwhile, over the past two decades, trade unions and women's organizations have kept up an educational campaign on this front. As a result, many employers have voluntarily recognized the fundamental justice of the principle of equal pay and have moved to discard their earlier inequitable pay practices.

18. American legislative history in these areas of standards for women workers carries a lesson for the newly emerging nations. Their womanpower will be needed to hasten their development, but their womanpower cannot attain its greatest industrial productivity unless reasonable standards for working conditions prevail from the very beginning. Our history of struggle, and that of other great industrial nations, should be convincing. These principles are recognized, too, in the resolutions and recommendations of the ILO. To the women of the new countries of Asia and Africa, we would say, "Don't consent to repeat our struggles. Start, as nearly as you can, from the level we have reached." It is not suggested that we in the United States have reached an ideal condition, and that we have nothing more to do, but at least we have come some distance along the way. Trade unions, employers, civic groups all recognize that decent wages and working conditions and nondiscriminatory practices toward women are the sine qua non of a healthy and forward marching economy.

The Pattern of Working Life of Women in the United States

19. The life pattern of women in the U.S. has been substantially altered by the demand for their work as paid employees and their response to that demand. The modern pattern of women's employment reflects not only a radical change in the attitudes of our culture in general over the past century and a quarter, but a change in the attitudes of women themselves to work outside the home and to their total role in our society.

20. Perhaps the best way to vignette this pattern, which has been developing over the past decade or so, is to start with the young girl just finishing school (in the United States most girls complete at least 4 years of high school). Most unmarried girls will then go to work, at age 17 or 18, unless they enter college. Within 3 or 4 years, most of these girls will marry. Some of them will stop working for pay in order to get a new home organized, but a majority will continue to work. By keeping her job a young wife may help put her husband through school, may make it possible for them to buy a home, a new automobile or the labor-saving equipment that modern industry produces in such abundance. But there is another, more basic motive underlying the decision of many women, especially those who are highly educated and career-minded, to work after marriage. It is a desire to have a rounded, complete life in which they can achieve a sense of participation in and contribution to every phase of our national life.

21. When the first baby arrives, however, the vast majority of young mothers give up their jobs and remain out of the labor market until their youngest child is old enough to go to school. It is true that as many as one in seven women with preschool-age children do continue to work, many because of economic necessity, but the general pattern is that the age group 25-34 supplies the lowest proportion of women workers. Here, again, the woman has a choice. Even though there is no great economic need, if the mother feels she can make a greater contribution by providing capable care for her children and continuing work, she may well do so.

22. In the majority of cases the trek of mothers back to paid employment begins when the youngest child no longer needs constant care. This usually happens when the women are approaching their middle thirties, after they have been non-wage earners for about 8 to 10 years. Once back, the tendency is for them to remain in the labor force, perhaps not continuously, but certainly for a substantial proportion of their years to age 65. By 1970, nearly half of all women between 35 and 65 probably will be either working or looking for work. Unless things change radically and unexpectedly in the years ahead, the highest labor force participation rate will be among women aged 45 to 54.

23. These comments have concentrated on the life pattern of married women because they will be in the vast majority. But for the small proportion of women who remain single, the length of working life will be little different from that of men. Since most single women must support themselves, and often parents or other relatives, they must continue to hold a job. In summary, the "work-life expectancy," as it is often referred to, looks like this for women: For single women, 40 years at work; for childless married women, 31 years, and for married women with children who do decide to reenter the work force, a discontinuous total of 27 years, or about 4 years before marriage and 23 years after. For women who are widowed, divorced, or separated from their husbands (22 percent of the female labor force in 1960) the pattern of working life, once they reenter paid employment, becomes more nearly like that of the single woman.

24. Within this general overall pattern there is great variety, and one should not assume that this will be the life story of <u>every</u> girl in the United States.

Some, a relatively small proportion, marry and go directly into homemaking without any period of paid employment, and never do actually get into the labor force at any time in their lives. Another group, which seems to be getting smaller all the time, are the women who leave their jobs when they marry or have their first child, and never return to paid employment afterward. Lest you think these situations means a cloistered, utterly domestic life, let me hasten to add that many of these women make an important contribution outside their homes through volunteer work in civic, political, educational or artistic fields, without which community life in the United States would indeed be poorer. But this type of work, because unpaid, does not qualify these women to be counted as members of the labor force. Many women in paid employment also participate in these volunteer groups, but their available time for such activities is obviously more limited.

25. At the opposite end of the scale are the married women who follow what has been called a "double track" arrangement of both homemaking and employment, wherein the continuity of work is interrupted briefly for the birth of children, after which the woman returns to work. This pattern is characteristic of many women who have had specialized professional training, such as doctors or government officials, and at the opposite end of the economic spectrum, the women in low income families who must continue to work to assure the essentials of living for their families, even though a husband may also be present.

26. For most of our history in the United States, indeed until well into the present century, the indigenous culture frowned upon the idea of a married woman working outside her home. A young man was considered improvident and undesirable, and a young girl foolish to consider him as a husband, unless he was able to support her and their children without her assistance through outside work. But cultural patterns respond to economic and other changes, such as rapid acceleration in the industrial process and the need to supplement the labor force in time of war. Both these factors, plus the rising educational attainment of women, have broken down what now seem antiquated mores. To have a working wife is no longer a "disgrace" to a man, nor is being a working wife a badge of shame or poverty to a woman.

27. The old myth of marriages "ruined" by wives working outside the home has disappeared; in fact, the statistics on marriage indicate that a young woman's ability to bring home a pay check has actually stimulated marriage and at younger ages. Whereas in 1890, 55 percent of the women and 52 percent of the men were married (excluding widowed or divorced), in 1960, 66 percent of the men and 70 percent of the women were married and living with spouse. In 1890 the median age at first marriage was 22.0 years for women and 26.1 years for men; by 1940 this had dropped to 21.5 for women and 24.3 for men, and by 1960 to 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men, a decrease of almost 2 years for women, and 3.3 years for men, most of this change having taken place since 1940. The modal age for girls is now even less--a mere 18 years. Our young men are clearly either bolder, or feel more financially secure by virtue of being able to take a wife who can earn. As for our young women, they are less willing to endure long engagements until their prospective husbands can support them and families without supplementary income. Thus the needs of our industrial economy and the gentler bonds of romance have conspired together to stimulate the participation of women in the labor force.

Education and Training of Women

28. The rising level of women's contribution to the U. S. economy would not be possible, however, had not our educational goals and free public schooling been available to them. Their achievements in the world of work, like those of men, depend to a high degree on the amount and quality of their education.

29. In the last few years it has become a truism among economists and vocational counseling specialists that the great employment expansion of the future will be in those occupations requiring higher levels of education and skill. Unskilled jobs on the farm and in industry are declining rapidly; more and more semiskilled jobs will yield to automation. The job outlook is brightest for those who have something specific in the way of skill or professional training to offer an employer. Gone is

the day when a worker who says he "can do anything" is considered a prize. In our modern economy we know this is not true, and it behooves the seeker for work to be able to do something and, moreover, something that an employer wants done. Recent studies by the United States Department of Labor of the actual work experience of young people demonstrates conclusively that those who discontinue their formal education before completing 4 years of high school (we refer to them as "school dropouts"), have more difficulty getting jobs, get lower-skill jobs, earn less money and have substantially more unemployment than those who complete but do not go beyond high school. Among girls, for example, 60 percent got office jobs immediately on finishing high school compared with only 11 percent of the girls who have dropped out. Unskilled jobs claimed 55 percent of the dropouts, but only 12 percent of the graduates.

30. Today, education to at least age 16 is required generally throughout the United States. This applies to girls as well as to boys. In 1961 over nine-tenths of all girls (and boys) between 7 and 17 were enrolled in school. The majority of both sexes remain in school until they get a high school diploma. In fact, somewhat higher proportions of girls than boys complete the course. After age 17 enrollment rates drop, but more sharply for girls than for boys, reflecting the fact that higher proportions of men than women go on to college. Nevertheless, about 1-½ million women (6 percent of all female school enrollees under age 35) were attending colleges or professional schools in the fall of 1961, compared with about 2-½ million boys (9 percent of all male school enrollees under age 35). Roughly another 300,000 girls between the ages of 18 and 24 were enrolled in some type of private trade school or business college, such as art, cosmetology, fashion design and others.

31. The educational attainment of women at college level continues ever upward. For example, women attending college in 1961 were double the number attending in 1950, although the number of girls aged 18 to 21 (the normal age-span for college attendance in the United States) had risen by only 12 percent in that decade. The median number of school years completed by women in the labor force in 1959 was 12.2 years, or something better than high school, compared with 11.5 years for men. For both sexes the educational attainment of the labor force exceeded that of the total adult population by something under one-half year. Though the educational level of the labor force is high, the manpower needs of the future will require increasingly more education and more specialized skills, not only in the United States but in all developing countries, no matter what the present level of their economy.

32. Women in the United States have not achieved their relatively high educational level all at once. A century ago a college education for women was a rarity, and the fight to establish educational facilities equal in quality to those available to men was bitter and long, just as was women's battle to enter the professions. Quite aside from matters of prejudice and discrimination, one could hardly expect to become a lawyer or a doctor or an architect or a nurse without the necessary training. The importance of access to education as a prerequisite to achievement in work is obvious in theory and is proven by facts. In 1959 the largest percentage of women in professional occupations had a college education; in clerical, managerial and sales occupations, 4 years of high school, and in operative and service occupations, an elementary school education.

33. A fairly recent development has been the introduction by educational institutions in the United States of programs to provide continuing education for women with college training who either interrupted their careers for marriage or who never put the skills and talents they developed as students to use because of early marriage. These women are invited to return to classes to renew skills or to train for new ones. Some of these programs, notably that of Radcliffe College, are particularly concerned with the highly gifted women.

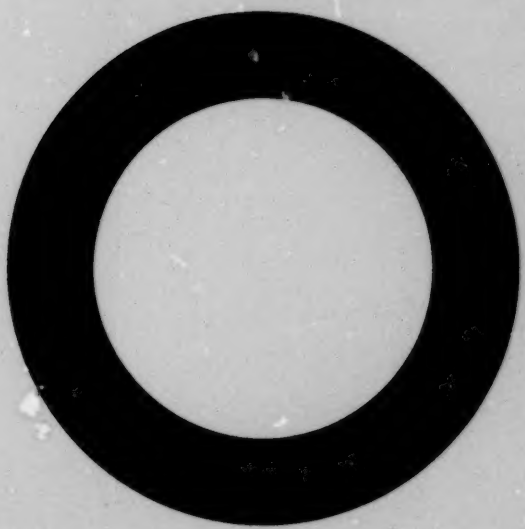
34. To those who want a high level of economic opportunity in the future we in the United States continue to say, and with greater and greater intensity: "Go to school, develop a skill, learn a trade, prepare for a profession. The race will be to those who know and to those who can do."

35. This advice is equally applicable to women in all parts of the world. no matter from what economic base their countries may be forging ahead into an industrialized society. We have attempted to help them realize their goals for economic and social advance. The United States Government has, since the mid-1940's, been opening up its resources for training and observation and study to women from all over the world. It has financed scholarships and training grants to hundreds of women from Afghanistan to Yugoslavia. Many others have come to the United States through grants by private industry, international agencies, educational institutions, civic groups and women's organizations.

36. The U. S. Department of Labor alone has prepared and carried out programs for a thousand women from 75 countries. These women have come from a great variety of professions, backgrounds and program interests. Among them have been lawyers, doctors, social workers, Directors of Bureaus for Women and Children in Ministries of Labor, teachers, housewives, community and organization of leaders, journalists, radio and television broadcasters and programmers, government officials, trade union leaders, factory and office workers, volunteer social workers, vocational guidance experts, market women. They have had the opportunity to confer with workers here in similar positions, to see new developments in this country in their fields of interest, to learn methods of improving working conditions, of educational and training facilities, of programs of rehabilitation for the blind and other physically handicapped; how to make studies and surveys on which to base action suitable to their countries' needs. They have participated in planning their programs and in suggesting places and persons to see. Their freedom of choice in working out their schedules has been encouraged.

37. We do not for a moment believe that this international exchange is a one-way street. After all, the United States is a changing society too, and we learn through the fresh eyes and minds of others where we are rigid, resistant to recognition of needed change, unaware of areas where our own past solutions will not be appropriate for different conditions. One of the most heartening results of our visitor programs in the United States and our technical assistance programs abroad has been the stimulation of our own citizens by what they have heard and seen and experienced through contact with other places and other societies. For example, one question that foreign women visitors raise so often with us is, "Why do you not provide for better and more day nurseries, child care centers, household services for working mothers?" Or, in an entirely different sphere: "Your women are so alert, so well-educated, so independent in spirit. Why do you have so few of them in elective or appointive office?" These questions give us pause. We learn from our guests ways in which we can put our own house in better order.

38. The woman worker in the United States intends to move forward from where she is. She does not intend to be satisfied with her achievements in the past. We women still have to win the battle of equal pay in some lines of work. There are still areas of discrimination in job opportunities and in advancement. To assist her in these unfinished tasks the modern woman in the U. S. does have one precious privilege in abundance--her personal freedom to choose what she will do with her life: whether she will marry or not; whether, if married, she will work or not; what occupation she will train for; how she will use the money she earns. Through her liberty to act, she influences to a major degree the cultural and economic changes in our society by cherishing, cultivating, and buttressing one of the most fundamental of her human rights--her right to work.



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